

How *to* Read *the* Psalms



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Chron. 16:7; Neh. 12:8; Ps. 25:1–5; Ps. 33:1–3; Rom. 8:26, 27; Ps. 82:8; Ps. 121:7.*

Memory Text: “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (*Luke 24:44, 45, NKJV*).

The Psalms have been a prayer book and hymnbook for both Jews and Christians through the ages. And though the Psalms are predominantly the psalmists' own words addressed to God, the Psalms did not originate with mortals but with God, who inspired their thoughts.

Indeed, the Lord inspired them to write what they did, which is why, as in all of Scripture (*2 Pet. 1:21*), God in the Psalms speaks to us through His servants and by His Spirit. Jesus, the apostles, and the writers of the New Testament cited the Psalms and referred to them as Scripture (*Mark 12:10; John 10:34, 35; John 13:18*). They are as surely the Word of God as are the books of Genesis and Romans.

The Psalms have been written in Hebrew poetry by different authors from ancient Israel, and so, the Psalms reflect their particular world, however universal their messages. Accepting the Psalms as God's Word and paying close attention to the Psalms' poetic features, as well as their historical, theological, and liturgical contexts, is fundamental for understanding their messages, which reach across thousands of years to our time today.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 6.

The Psalms in Ancient Israel's Worship

Read 1 Chronicles 16:7, Nehemiah 12:8, Psalm 18:1, Psalm 30:1, Psalm 92:1, Psalm 95:2, Psalm 105:2, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13. What were the occasions that prompted the writing of some psalms? When did God's people use the Psalms?

The Psalms were composed for use in private and in communal worship. They were sung as hymns in temple worship, as suggested by the musical annotations that mention instruments (*Ps. 61:1*), tunes (*Ps. 9:1*), and music leaders (*Ps. 8:1*).

In the Hebrew Bible, the title of the Book of Psalms, *tehilim*, "praises," reflects its main purpose—that is, the praise of God. The English title *Book of Psalms* is derived from the Greek *psalmoi*, found in the Septuagint, an early (second and third century B.C.) Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The Psalms were an indispensable part of Israel's worship. For example, they were used in temple dedications, religious feasts, and processions, as well as during the setting down of the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem.

"The Songs of Ascents" (*Psalms 120–134*), also known as the pilgrimage songs, were traditionally sung during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the three major annual festivals (*Exod. 23:14–17*). The "Egyptian Hallel" (*Psalms 113–118*) and the "Great Hallel" (*Psalm 136*) were sung at the three major annual festivals, including the festivals of the New Moon and the dedication of the temple. The Egyptian Hallel received a significant place in the Passover ceremony. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung at the beginning of the Passover meal and Psalms 115–118 at the end (*Matt. 26:30*). The "Daily Hallel" (*Psalms 145–150*) was incorporated into the daily prayers in the synagogue morning services.

The Psalms did not only accompany the people's worship, but they also instructed them on how they should worship God in the sanctuary. Jesus prayed with the words of Psalm 22 (*Matt. 27:46*). The Psalms found a significant place in the life of the early church, as well (*Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19*).

Though we, of course, do not worship God in an earthly sanctuary like the temple, how can we use the Psalms in our own worship, whether in a private or in a corporate setting?

Meet the Psalmists

King David, whose name appears in the titles of most psalms, was active in organizing the liturgy of Israel's worship. He is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (*2 Sam. 23:1*). The New Testament attests to Davidic authorship of various psalms (*Matt. 22:43–45; Acts 2:25–29, 34, 35; Acts 4:25; Rom. 4:6–8*). Numerous psalms were composed by the temple musicians who were also Levites: for example, Psalm 50 and Psalms 73–83 by Asaph; Psalm 42, Psalms 44–47, Psalm 49, Psalm 84, Psalm 85, and Psalm 88 by the sons of Korah; Psalm 88 by Heman the Ezrahite; and Psalm 89 by Ethan the Ezrahite. Beyond them, Solomon (*Psalm 72, Psalm 127*) and Moses (*Psalm 90*) authored some psalms.

Read Psalm 25:1–5; Psalm 42:1; Psalm 75:1; Psalm 77:1; Psalm 84:1, 2; Psalm 88:1–3; and Psalm 89:1. What do these psalms reveal about the experiences their authors were going through?

The Holy Spirit inspired the psalmists and used their talents in service to God and to their community of faith. The psalmists were people of genuine devotion and profound faith and yet prone to discouragements and temptations, as are the rest of us. Though written a long time ago, the Psalms surely reflect some of what we experience today.

"Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave" (*Ps. 88:2, 3, NKJV*). This is a cry of the twenty-first-century soul as much as it was of someone 3,000 years ago.

Some psalms mention hardships; some focus on joys. The psalmists cried out to God to save them and experienced His undeserved favor. They glorified God for His faithfulness and love, and they pledged their untiring devotion to Him. The Psalms are, thus, testimonies of divine Redemption and signs of God's grace and hope. The Psalms convey a divine promise to all who embrace, by faith, God's gifts of forgiveness and of a new life. Yet, at the same time, they do not try to cover up, hide, or downplay the hardships and suffering prevalent in a fallen world.

How can we draw hope and comfort knowing that even faithful people, such as the psalmists, struggled with some of the same things that we do?

A Song for Every Season

Read Psalm 3, Psalm 33:1–3, and Psalm 109:6–15. What different facets of human experience do these psalms convey?

The Psalms make the believing community aware of the full range of human experience, and they demonstrate that believers can worship God in every season in life. In them we see the following:

(1) Hymns that magnify God for His majesty and power in creation, His kingly rule, judgment, and faithfulness. (2) Thanksgiving psalms that express profound gratitude for God’s abundant blessings. (3) Laments that are heartfelt cries to God for deliverance from trouble. (4) Wisdom psalms that provide practical guidelines for righteous living. (5) Royal psalms that point to Christ, who is the sovereign King and Deliverer of God’s people. (6) Historical psalms that recall Israel’s past and highlight God’s faithfulness and Israel’s unfaithfulness to teach the coming generations not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors but to trust God and remain faithful to His covenant.

The poetry of the Psalms demonstrates distinctive power to capture the attention of readers. Though some of these poetic devices are lost in translation, we can still, in our native language, appreciate many of them.

1. *Parallelism* involves the combining of symmetrically constructed words, phrases, or thoughts. Parallelism helps in understanding the meaning of corresponding parts. For instance: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!” (*Ps. 103:1, NKJV*). In this parallelism, “my soul” is “all that is within me,” namely one’s whole being.

2. *Imagery* uses figurative language to strongly appeal to readers’ physical senses. For example, God’s refuge is depicted as “the shadow of [His] wings” (*Ps. 17:8, NKJV*).

3. *Merism* expresses totality by a pair of contrasting parts. “I have cried *day and night* before thee” denotes crying without ceasing (*Ps. 88:1, emphasis supplied*).

4. *Wordplays* employ the sound of words to make a pun and highlight a spiritual message. In Psalm 96:4, 5 the Hebrew words *’elohim*, “gods,” and *’elilim*, “idols,” create a wordplay to convey the message that the gods of the nations only appear to be *’elohim*, “gods,” but are merely *’elilim*, “idols.”

Finally, the word “selah” denotes a brief interlude, either for a call to pause and reflect on the message of a particular section of the psalm or a change of musical accompaniment (*Ps. 61:4*).

Inspired Prayers

Read 2 Samuel 23:1, 2 and Romans 8:26, 27. What do these texts teach us about prayer?

The Psalms are inspired prayers and praises of Israel, and so, in the Psalms the voice is that of God intermingled with that of His people. The Psalms assume the dynamics of vivid interactions with God.

The psalmists address God personally as “my God,” “O Lord,” and “my King” (*Ps. 5:2, Ps. 84:3*). The psalmists often implore God to “give ear” (*Ps. 5:1*), “hear my prayer” (*Ps. 39:12*), “look” (*Ps. 25:18*), “answer me” (*Ps. 102:2*), and “deliver me” (*Ps. 6:4, NKJV*). These are clearly the expressions of someone praying to God.

The remarkable beauty and appeal of the Psalms as prayers and praises lie in the fact that the Psalms are the Word of God in the form of the pious prayers and praises of believers. The Psalms, thus, provide God’s children with moments of intimacy, such as described in Romans 8:26, 27: “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (*NKJV*).

Jesus, too, quoted from the Psalms, such as in Luke 20:42, 43, when He quoted directly from Psalm 110:1—“ ‘Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: “The LORD said to my Lord, / ‘Sit at My right hand, / Till I make Your enemies Your footstool’ ” ’ ” (*NKJV*).

Although some psalms have sprung from, or refer to, specific historical events and the experiences of the psalmists themselves, as well as the experiences of Israel as a nation, the Psalms’ spiritual depth speaks to a variety of life situations and crosses all cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender boundaries. In other words, as you read the Psalms, you will find them expressing hope, praise, fear, anger, sadness, and sorrow, things that people everywhere, in every age, no matter their circumstances, face. They speak to us all, in the language of our own experiences.

What should Jesus’ use of the Psalms tell us about the importance that they could play in our own faith experience?

The World of the Psalms

Read Psalm 16:8; Psalm 44:8; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 47:1, 7; Psalm 57:2; Psalm 62:8; Psalm 82:8; and Psalm 121:7. What place does God occupy in the psalmist's life?

The world of the Psalms is wholly God-centered; it seeks to submit, in prayer and praise, all life experiences to God. God is the Sovereign Creator, the King and Judge of all the earth. He provides all things for His children. Therefore, He is to be trusted at all times. Even the enemies of God's people ask, "Where is your God?" when God's people seem to be failing (*Ps. 42:10, NKJV*). Just as the Lord is the ever-present and never-failing God of His people, so God's people have God always before them. Ultimately, the Psalms envision the time when all peoples and the entire creation will worship God (*Ps. 47:1, Ps. 64:9*).

The centrality of God in life produces the centrality of worship. The worship in which the Psalms lived was fundamentally different from worship as understood by many people today, because worship in the biblical culture was the natural and undisputed center of the entire community's life. Therefore, everything that happened, both the good and the bad, in the life of God's people inevitably was expressed in worship. God hears the psalmist, wherever he may be, and responds to him in His perfect time (*Ps. 3:4, Ps. 18:6, Ps. 20:6*).

The psalmist is aware that God's dwelling place is in heaven, but at the same time, God dwells in Zion, in the sanctuary among His people. God is at the same time far and near, everywhere, and in His temple (*Ps. 11:4*), hidden (*Ps. 10:1*) and disclosed (*Ps. 41:12*). In the Psalms these apparently mutually exclusive characteristics of God are brought together. The psalmists understood that proximity and remoteness were inseparable within the true being of God (*Ps. 24:7-10*). The psalmists understood the dynamics of this spiritual tension. Their awareness of God's goodness and presence, amid whatever they were experiencing, is what strengthens their hope while they wait for God to intervene, however and whenever He chooses to do so.

How can the Psalms help us understand that we cannot limit God to certain aspects of our existence only? What might be parts of your life in which you are seeking to keep the Lord at a distance?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Temple and Its Dedication,” pp. 35–50, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Benefits of Music,” pp. 291, 292, in *Messages to Young People*.

The book of Psalms consists of 150 psalms, which are grouped into five books: Book I (*Psalms 1–41*), Book II (*Psalms 42–72*), Book III (*Psalms 73–89*), Book IV (*Psalms 90–106*), and Book V (*Psalms 107–150*). The five-book division of the Psalter is an early Jewish tradition that parallels the five-book division of the Pentateuch.

The book of Psalms provides evidence of some already-existing collections of psalms: the Korahite collections (*Psalms 42–49, 84, 85, 87, 88*), the Asaphite collection (*Psalms 73–83*), the Songs of the Ascents (*Psalms 120–134*), and the Hallelujah Psalms (*Psalms 111–118, 146–150*). Psalm 72:20 bears witness to a smaller collection of David’s psalms.

While most psalms are associated with the time of King David and early monarchy (tenth century B.C.), the collection of psalms continued to grow through the following centuries: the divided monarchy, the exile, and the postexilic period. It is conceivable that the Hebrew scribes under the leadership of Ezra combined the existing smaller collections of psalms into one book when they worked on establishing the services of the new temple.

The fact that scribes consolidated the book of Psalms does not take away from their divine inspiration. The scribes, like the psalmists, were devoted servants of God, and their work was directed by God (*Ezra 7:6, 10*). The divine-human nature of the Psalms is comparable to the union of the divine and the human in the incarnated Lord Jesus. “But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 8.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does it mean that the Psalms are divine-human prayers and hymns? How does this idea, however difficult to fully grasp, help us see the closeness that God wants with His people? How does it reveal, in its own way, how close to humanity, and to each of us, God is?
- 2 In class, talk about a time in which you found something in the Psalms speaking directly to your own situation. What comfort and hope did you find there?

Finding Jesus in a Holy Book

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Paul went from home to home to meet people in a European city. With him, he carried a Bible and the holy book of another major world religion.

One day, a man opened the door. His breath smelled of cigarette smoke.

“I would very much like to give you a gift today,” Paul said.

“What kind of gift?” the man asked.

“I have this Bible,” Paul said.

“I don’t want a Bible,” the man said. “I belong to another religion. You are a Christian.”

“I have the holy book of your religion, too,” Paul said.

The man was surprised. He seemed interested. “OK, read something to me but only from my holy book, not from the Bible,” he said.

Paul opened the holy book and read about Jesus. The man’s surprise grew.

“Is this the same Jesus as in the Bible?” he asked.

Over the next few weeks, he studied four lessons about Jesus from his holy book. The man saw that the book does not talk about Jesus being crucified. He saw that the book predicts Jesus will come again. He saw that both people from his religion and Christians were waiting for Jesus to return.

When Paul arrived for the fifth lesson, the man wasn’t home.

A year passed, and one Sabbath the man showed up at Paul’s church.

“I want to come to this church,” he said. “Can I?”

It was Paul’s turn to be surprised.

“I want to follow Christ,” the man said.

After that, the man came every Sabbath. He said his holy book left him feeling empty. It offered no Savior for his sins. He longed to be baptized.

“Jesus says the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit,” Paul said. “Do you want to be free of cigarettes? Jesus said, ‘If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed’ [John 8:36, NKJV]. You have to choose Jesus or cigarettes. You can throw away your cigarettes today if you choose.”

The man looked scared. “It isn’t possible!” he blurted out. But then he reached into his pocket and threw a cigarette pack into a trash can.

“Jesus, give me victory over cigarettes,” he prayed. “I want to be free.”

Late that night, he called Paul. “This is terrible,” he said. “I feel awful. I cannot live without cigarettes.”

The two men prayed together on the phone. God heard the prayer and gave the man victory. He has not smoked in the four and a half years since then. Today, he is an outreach leader for the church.

“He loves people,” Paul told Adventist Mission. He is waiting eagerly for Jesus to return.

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